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Viewing cable 06SANJOSE1955, COSTA RICA ON CUBAN TRANSITION: WE,LL DO IT OUR WAY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06SANJOSE1955	2006-09-01 17:24	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2710281.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotaPrincipal/Investigacion2710282.aspx>

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FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5994
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO IMMEDIATE 0418
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO IMMEDIATE 3588
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA IMMEDIATE 0017

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 001955

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [CU](#) [CI](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA ON CUBAN TRANSITION: WE,LL DO IT OUR WAY

REF: A. STATE 139584
B. WHA-SAN JOSE EMAIL 8/16/06

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On August 28, Ambassador and DCM called on FM Bruno Stagno to discuss how to further bilateral and regional cooperation in support of a democratic transition in Cuba. Stagno was receptive to the suggestion that Arias and the GOCR use Costa Rica's "moral stature" to advocate change in Cuba, but with caveats. He said the GOCR is not convinced a genuine transition is underway; Costa Rica has limited moral authority with Cuba, anyway; Arias will have to focus more on domestic or other pressing international issues (such as relations with Nicaragua); and Mexico's domestic political uncertainties have hampered efforts to form a contact group with Chile and Costa Rica. Stagno raised the notion of first lifting the U.S. embargo as a catalyst for motivating the Cuban "street." The Ambassador made clear that this was decidedly not the USG view. The FM dismissed the September 1 SICA meeting as "technical," and thus not the venue for crafting a common approach on Cuba. Neither he nor President Arias will attend. Instead, the UNGA will be an "important opportunity" to discuss Cuba. For his part, Arias penned an Op-ed on August 29 which helpfully described Cuba as a dictatorship and called for creating the conditions for the Cuban people to choose a course for themselves, but which unhelpfully urged lifting the embargo and a U.S. withdrawal from Guantanamo Bay. Despite the latter aspect, Arias' stance on Cuba has been the most forward-leaning in the region. We will encourage him to continue leaning in the right direction. END SUMMARY.

STAGNO: LIMITS TO MORAL AUTHORITY

¶2. (C) On August 28, Ambassador and DCM called on FM Bruno Stagno to discuss how to further bilateral and regional cooperation in support of a democratic transition in Cuba. Drawing from refs, the Ambassador stressed the need for regional solidarity with the people of Cuba, and applauded President Arias' recent statements in support of democracy on the island. The Ambassador also pointed to A/S Shannon's August 23 Washington press conference and DVC with Costa Rican media on the issue, and noted that USOAS Ambassador Maisto's visit to San Jose in September would likely touch on Cuba-related issues (and other topics).

¶3. (C) Stagno was receptive to the suggestion that Arias and the GOCR use Costa Rica's "moral stature" to advocate change in Cuba, but with the following caveats:

-- The GOCR is not convinced that a genuine transition is underway. The last four weeks could be a "test run," measuring both domestic Cuban and international reaction. Even if Fidel's illness marked the start of a true transition, in the GOCR's view, Raul Castro, FM Perez-Roque and other senior figures in the regime were likely prepared to "ride out the storm" for some time. Stagno agreed that the regime was on "unsure footing," however;

-- The GOCR's "moral authority" is hobbled because Cuba views Costa Rica as "an enemy" and the two countries lack full diplomatic relations. Although the GOCR's CG in Havana is very active, doing what he can with the contacts that he has, Costa Rica feels "alone and outgunned" in dealing with the regime and reaching out to dissidents. The public Arias-VP Lage contretemps over a possible meeting in Bogotá during the Uribe inauguration had made matters worse. According to Stagno, Arias wanted a "quiet conversation" with Castro in which he would stress that "the world had changed" and it was therefore time for Castro to "stop sacrificing himself" for the sake of the revolution. When Fidel became indisposed, the notion of a meeting with Lage seemed appropriate. Arias never intended to present a "letter" to Lage, but once the story appeared in the Costa Rican media, the meeting was off;

-- President Arias is constrained by the need to be perceived as primarily a "domestic president," in order to achieve

other parts of his agenda. If the GOCR focuses on any regional issue, it will be Nicaragua. As the November elections approach, and especially if Ortega remains positioned for a possible victory, Costa Rica will have to turn its attention in that direction (instead of worrying Cuba); and

-- Although Chile and Mexico could be helpful, efforts to form a regional contact group on Cuba with Costa Rica and languished because of the domestic political uncertainty in Mexico.

STAGNO: WHAT ABOUT THE EMBARGO?

¶4. (C) The FM raised the notion of first lifting the U.S. embargo as a catalyst for motivating the Cuban "street" to voice its opposition to the Raul succession and the regime. The Ambassador made clear that this was decidedly not the USG view. The sequence would have to be the reverse; much would have to change on the island before the President would consider approaching Congress about the embargo. Referring back to A/S Shannon's public remarks, the Ambassador reminded Stagno that a presidential offer to approach Congress about the embargo had been on the table (although rejected by Fidel) since 2002. The Ambassador stressed that this was not the time to "give" anything to Cuba, but a time to "push," using tools such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Cuba can be pushed off balance, he concluded.

¶5. (C) Stagno dismissed the September 1 SICA meeting as "technical," and thus not a venue for crafting a common approach on Cuba. Neither he nor President Arias will attend. Instead, Stagno will attend the NAM meeting in Havana September 13-16 as an observer, before joining Arias in New York for UNGA-related events the week of September 17. The NAM meeting would offer Stagno a first-hand look at what is going on in Cuba, he said, plus provide an opportunity to lobby for Costa Rica's UNSC seat in 2008. The UNGA, he stressed, will be an "important opportunity" to discuss Cuba. Stagno added that Perez-Roque's invitation to attend the NAM was a surprising volte-face, given the brouhaha with Lage in Bogotá.

ARIAS: THE GUANTAMO GAMBIT?

¶6. (SBU) Although Stagno never mentioned Guantanamo (or hinted that Arias was about to write anything about Cuba), the President's August 29 op-ed in leading daily La Nación called for regional efforts "in every international forum" to press for lifting the embargo and closing Guantanamo Bay and returning the base's territory to Cuba. These two arguments marred what was otherwise an impassioned, articulate description of Cuba as ". . . plain and simple, a dictatorship," and a call to ". . . creat(e) the conditions for the Cuban people to truly choose a course for themselves."

COMMENT:

¶7. (C) Despite the op-ed (which was 95 percent helpful), Arias' stance on Cuba has been the most forward-leaning in the region. We will encourage him to continue leaning in the right direction; the Ambassador has requested a meeting with Arias to clarify what he meant in the op-ed. Interjecting a Guantanamo argument makes no sense (and has found little resonance here). Arias' comments may reflect some tactical distancing from the U.S., and we have heard this explanation from some contacts here. Although the president agrees in general on the need for democracy in Cuba, he can't be seen as a U.S. lackey, on Cuba or any other issue. On the other hand, Arias' foreign policy objectives in this administration already seem to be filtered through the prism

of the 2008 UNSC race. If so, potential vote-getting legalisms, however far-fetched (such as pushing for USG withdrawal from Guantanamo) may increasingly color GOCR thinking.

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